Abigail Kutlas

Commencement remarks
June 22, 2018
Cahn Auditorium

Like many of you, I was not a SESP student when I first came to Northwestern. After spending almost two years in two different schools, I finally found my way to our little place in Annenberg. More accurately, I found my way home.

The thing most other Northwestern students don’t understand is that what makes our work in SESP so difficult is that it is, as we heard at our senior gathering earlier this week, heart work. It requires us to get close to people – to listen to people and really see them. It requires us to leave prejudices and biases at the door. It requires us to hold many truths at once and to question what the truth even is. Regardless of what concentration you chose within SESP and what you will do after SESP, we are all people who love people, and we are all people who will lead as much with our hearts as we will with our minds. This is work that makes us vulnerable, but it also makes us brave. I am so honored to have done, and to continue to do, this work with all of you.

Of course, we did not learn how to do the heart work all on our own. SESP is a community unlike any other at Northwestern or perhaps any university. The example of how to lead with love has been set by our incredible team of advisors and staff members who work in the Student Affairs Office, where the candy bowl is always full, the doors are always open, and the Pita Inn catering is always abundant. Our esteemed roster of professors and faculty members poured hours into us, creating courses and conversations that would challenge, stretch, and inspire us so that we might develop our individual gifts and use them to transform our world.

Lastly, our brand-new dean, David Figlio, constantly opened his email inbox, office, and home to SESP students to help us all, from first-year to senior, feel a part of this incredible community. Although as he admitted to us earlier in the week that this first year has “kicked his ass” a little — a technical term, he assured us — he has done a phenomenal job and we are so honored to be under his leadership. Please join me in thanking our incredible SESP team.
As much as we have our faculty and staff leaders to thank for encouraging, loving, and supporting us in doing what we do, our community extends beyond that. SESP class of 2018, if you have anyone in your life that has contributed to helping you attain this monumental achievement, please join me in giving all the parents, siblings, grandparents, godparents, cousins, aunts, uncles, friends, teachers, and anyone in between, a heartfelt 'thank you.'

And to my fellow classmates, I want to congratulate you on every group paper and group presentation you’ve completed, with probably half of the people in this room, on every free meal you’ve copped from the leftovers in the SAO, on every instance of #sesplove you’ve shown and been shown, and for every time you’ve had to explain what the name of your concentration actually means. In all seriousness, I never could have imagined the inspiration and joy I would gain from learning with you all. My biggest congratulations go to each of you for not just doing well, but doing good.

It has been an honor to serve with my freshman year roommate, Joy Holden, as SESP's Convocation Co-chairs for 2018. One of my final duties is to make these announcements:

1) A reception for all graduates and their guests will take place on the lawn just west of where we are sitting now, immediately following the ceremony. No tickets are needed and light treats and refreshments will be served. If you see a big white tent and Dean Figlio, you’ve found us!
2) Secondly, I know that these purple gowns are absolutely beautiful, but we can't keep them. Graduates can drop off their gowns just west of where we currently are, in the sunken garden next to Scott Hall and Cahn Auditorium, near the reception area. This is also where all spring graduates can pick up their actual diplomas!

As we go into the world beyond Northwestern, as unbelievable as this seems, I cannot wait to see where all of our heart work takes us. Best wishes and congratulations again, and as always, Go ‘Cats!